



American Shad

Alosa sapidissima

The American shad has a thin, silvery body that varies in color from greenish to dark blue on the back. Adults have:

- A large, dark shoulder spot followed by several smaller, paler spots.
- Large, easily shed scales that come together to form a saw-toothed edge on the belly.
- A deeply forked tail.
- Usually grow to about 20 inches, but can be up to 30 inches and weigh up to 12 pounds.

Where do American shad live?

American shad live in coastal ocean waters. They visit the Bay each spring to spawn in its freshwater tributaries, including the James, Potomac and Susquehanna rivers. After spawning, American shad move downstream and, by summer, leave the Bay for the ocean.

What do American shad eat?

While at sea, American shad feed on plankton, small fishes and small crustaceans. They stop feeding once they begin their upstream spawning migration.

How do American shad reproduce?

American shad are anadromous fish. They migrate to the Bay's freshwater tributaries each spring to spawn. Most American shad are believed to return to the same river or stream where they hatched.

- The female lays anywhere from 100,000 to 600,000 eggs, which drift downstream and hatch before reaching salt water.
- After spawning, adults either die or return to the ocean.
- Young of the year remain in fresh and brackish waters, where they grow rapidly while feeding on copepods and insect larvae.
- In early fall, the young move out of the Bay into the ocean, where they remain for several years before returning to the Bay watershed to spawn.

Other facts about American shad:

- They are the largest and most well-known species of shad.
- Females can live as long as 10 years.
- Shad roe -- the eggs of the female American shad -- were once a delicacy in the Chesapeake region.
- Shad even have a tree named after them! The shadbush blooms in spring, around the same time that American shad return to the Bay's tributaries to spawn.